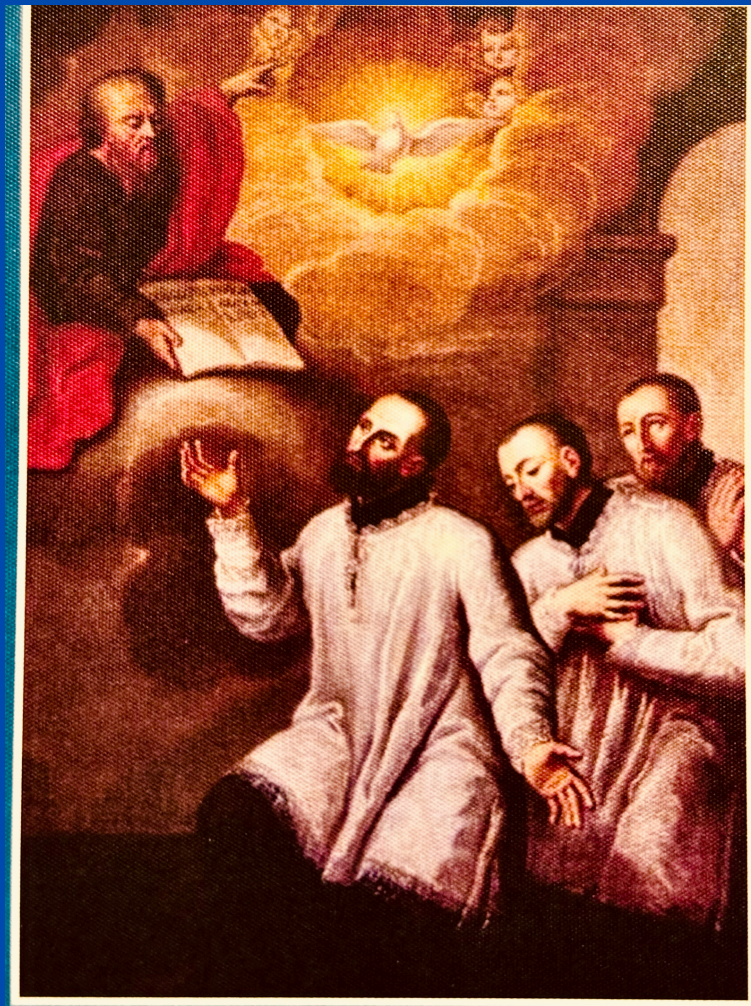


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THE BARNABITES



**Manual of history and spirituality
of the Order of Clerics Regular
of St. Paul Beheaded**

Chapter 15

MISSIONARIES IN THE FAR EAST

Preceding events

In the 17th century a new apostolate opened up for our Congregation, prepared during the previous centuries by the apostolic impetus of our confreres in those lands where the reform had spread.

Truly, our Fathers were not the ones to select this new apostolic field, that is, China at first, and then Burma. Rather it was a sequence of complex circumstances, and especially the will of Pope Clement XI (1700-1721). Nonetheless, the Barnabites engaged themselves in this ministry for more than a century with such dedication and love that, in our history for sure this is the most splendid example of missionary apostolate.

Chinese Rites Controversy

The Chinese Rites Controversy was a big event in the history of Catholicism in China and also a typical example of cultural clashes. This event almost endangered the existence of Catholicism in China. It referred to the controversy over a series of matters such as worship for Confucius and ancestors, sacrifice to the Heaven, and the Chinese translation and concept of God. The controversy on these matters was in fact the result of disagreements among European missionaries due to their different nationalities and different views: the Jesuits as one side and Dominicans and Franciscans on the other side. At the beginning of the 17th century, when Matteo Ricci, SJ, and other missionaries came to Beijing, they actively adapted to the Chinese customs and tolerated some Chinese customs, which did not go against the principal beliefs of Catholicism, so as to make their missionary activities successful. Sometimes they also adopted Chinese thoughts when explaining the Catholic doctrines.

After Matteo Ricci's death in 1610, his successor Niccolo Longobardi started the controversy. He was very dissatisfied with many phenomena at the time. His action led to the split-up of the missionaries. They kept on their arguments on the three major issues for a long time and it went more and more serious. What was the problem?

The Jesuits had been successful in penetrating China and serving at the Imperial court. They impressed the Chinese with their knowledge of European astronomy and mechanics, and in fact ran the Imperial Observatory. Their accurate methods allowed the Emperor to successfully predict eclipses, one of his ritual duties. Other Jesuits functioned as court painters. The Jesuits in turn were impressed by the Chinese Confucian elite, and adapted to that lifestyle.

The primary goal of the Jesuits was to spread Catholicism, but here they had a problem. The Chinese elite were attached to Confucianism, while Buddhism and Taoism were mostly practiced by the common people and lower aristocracy of this period. Despite this, all three provided the framework of both state and home life. Part of Confucian and Taoist practices involved veneration of one's ancestors.

Besides the Jesuits, other religious orders such as the Dominicans, Franciscans, and Augustinians had started missionary work in China during the 17th century, often coming from the Spanish colony of the Philippines. Contrary to the Jesuits, they refused any

adaptation to local customs and wished to apply in China the same *tabula rasa* principle they had applied in other places, and were horrified by the practices of the Jesuits.

They ignited a heated controversy and brought it to Rome. They raised three main points of contention:

- Determination of the Chinese word for “God.”
- Prohibition for Christians to participate in the season rites for Confucius.
- Prohibition for Christians of the use of tablets with the forbidden inscription “site of the soul,” and to follow the Chinese rites for the ancestor worship.

In Rome, the Jesuits tried to argue that these “Chinese Rites” were social (rather than religious) ceremonies, and that converts should be allowed to continue to participate. (The debate was not, as is sometimes thought, about whether the liturgy could be in Chinese rather than in Latin). The Jesuits argued that Chinese folk religion and offerings to the Emperor and departed ancestors were civil in nature and therefore not incompatible with Catholicism, while their opponents argued that these kinds of worship were a normal expression of local religion and therefore they should be incompatible for Chinese Christians.

Although in later European commentary on China it has continued to be claimed that Confucianism is a “philosophy” and not a “religion” - because it does not conform to the model of western religions, Pope Clement XI made the assessment that the Confucian rituals were indeed in conflict with Christian teaching.

In 1705, the Pope sent a Papal Legate to Emperor K’ang-nsi, to communicate to him the interdiction of Chinese rites. The mission, led by Charles-Thomas Maillard De Tournon, communicated the prohibition of Chinese rites in January 1707, but as a result he was banished to Macao where he died.

The preparation

The Pope in 1715 decided to send another legation. The leader of the legation was going to be Bishop Ambrose Mezzabarba, accompanied by other missionaries different from the ones already known to the Emperor. So the Pope thought about the Barnabites too.

Father General, Thomas Francis Roero, expressed his joy in a letter of August 7, 1715, addressed to the Provincial Superior of the Roman Province: “Our Lord has let me know through the Cardinal Datario, that he wishes to have some of our confreres to send to China to instruct those souls in the dogmas of the Holy Faith. This task is for the glory of God, and of great honor for our Congregation. According to the tradition of our Institute, and also not to be less than other smaller Congregations which could contribute workers, I wish you would use your charitable zeal with great enthusiasm to find subjects apt to this holy goal.”

Having manifested this desire to the whole Congregation, Father General had the joy of witnessing the great spirit of devotion and generosity of his religious. There were more than forty applications, and, as Father Premoli comments, “Considering the limitations of age, 26 to 36, and the small number of the Barnabites, 540, we have to agree that those forty applications were for Father Roero a most beautiful proof of the vitality of the religious spirit present among his sons.”

The chosen ones were: Onorato Ferrari, Sigismondo Calchi, Alexander de Alessandri, Philip Cesati, and Salvatore Rasini. Four years passed before any word of departure was mentioned.

The new Father General, Philip Petrucci, on his way back to Rome from the canonical visitation, learned that the departure was imminent. But not everything was clear yet, as he wrote to the Provincial Superior of Lombardy on January 14, 1719: “Nevertheless a different story circulates in Rome, as some say that the Jesuits don’t want anything to follow.” Father

Premoli carefully adds, “maybe this voice was spread by those who loved to speak ill of the Jesuits!”

Difficulties arise

The fact is that, true or false about the Jesuits, the long wait was making impatient our Fathers, and it became a tremendous trial for the apostolic and missionary zeal of Fr. Cesati and Fr. Ferrari. On behalf of their companions they presented the following petition to the Holy Father:

“Most Holy Father, there is a rumor that our apostolic mission to China, by now a common knowledge everywhere, is obstructed by mysterious obstacles and demoniac machinations. We are committed and do not pay attention to these rumors. But fearful that this could damage us, and worried about this mission by your goodness entrusted to us, we, in one accord, beg your clemency to free our hearts from this sadness, sending us, as soon as possible, where you had in mind to send us. Should we travel by land or by sea, in the midst of furious storms, we are ready, with God’s help, to go anywhere, even to death..., having as our only companion Divine Providence, which has never failed the apostles who work with a pure and sincere heart. We beg you than with insistence to send, in your position as the lord of the harvest, the workers selected by the Holy Spirit through you, in your harvest, before the enemy comes to sow weeds... In this way, having your seed - true wheat, not weeds - with pure hearts and conscience, in humility and faithfulness to the doctrine, not seeking personal interests, but the ones of Christ, they might produce hundredfold at the proper times. Then grant our desire not to be frustrated. This task to carry Christ’s name to the Gentiles and to the children of Israel fits better to whom but the children of the Apostle of the Gentiles, we who will preach to all not Paul, but Christ Crucified? If, once we reach those places, we will not be let in, we will stay by the door knocking until the all-powerful Lord will grant us an easy entry. There is only one thing left, most holy and beloved Father: with Peter’s keys you can close what no one can open, and open what no one can close: open for us the way towards these regions, which are full of difficulties, so that we can bring to you, universal shepherd, the sheep which are not in the fold, and lead to you the blind and the lame so that your home would be full. In this way a new glory will be yours: to have increased the Roman Faith to the honor of God and of Religion...”

The Holy Father was very pleased by this petition and the results came speedily. The four Fathers, Calchi, Cesati, de Alessandri, and Ferrari, who were already in Rome, were right away received in audience by Clement XI. As soon as Fr. Rasini arrived in Rome, they all had another audience which he described to the Provincial Superior of Lombardy in these words: “On the day of the Conversion of our Holy Apostle, we all went with the very reverend Fr. Strada, Procurator General, to the Holy Father, who received us like sons. He let all of us stand, and in a speech one-hour long, he expressed his great desire for this mission. He talked to us as a father, friend, and father of ours and of our Congregation, and said: ‘we know how much we owe to your Religion, which assists us with such great charity, and we are much in debt to your Fathers.’ If I wanted to say everything,” Fr. Rasini continues, “two sheets would not be sufficient. I will say nothing else but that His Holiness loves us very much. In so far as the final solution, it has not been reached yet, waiting for some letters.”

The trip to China

The first to leave were Fr. Ferrari and Fr. Cesati, chosen by the Holy Father as Pro-Legates to prepare the arrival of Bishop Charles Ambrose Mezzabarba (February 1, 1719). After a perilous trip the Fathers reached Beijing and were received by the Emperor

K'ang-nsi. The other missionaries waited in Rome until September, when Fr. Mezzabarba was consecrated a bishop. This mission had practically no results because of the influence exercised by some Mandarins over the Emperor who, at first, seemed to be willing to come to a compromise.

Having failed its purpose the legation left China in 1721, but our Fathers were sent to other countries. Fr. Cesati, Fr. de Alessandri, and Fr. Rasini went to Indochina, while Fr. Ferrari remained at the Court until 1722. Fr. Cesati, who had become Bishop, died three years later. Fr. de Alessandri took his place and was consecrated Bishop of Nabuco and nominated Apostolic Vicar of the kingdoms of Indochina, Ciampa, and Kampuchea.

The mission to Burma

Fr. Gallo writes that Fr. Sigismondo Calchi “was delegated by Bishop Mezzabarba as missionary and Apostolic Vicar in the Kingdoms of Ava, Pegù, and Martaban, and became the cornerstone of a regular and fruitful mission in those countries.”

Fr. Calchi knew how to conquer the benevolence of the king of Ava, who not only allowed preaching, but requested Fr. Vittoni to go back to Rome as his ambassador to the pope. Fr. Calchi, left alone, asked the Propagation of the Faith to send some more priests. The Congregation decided to divide the region entrusting to the priest George Rossetti and the Abbot Vittoni the kingdom of Ava, and sent Fr. Gallizia to help Fr. Calchi in the kingdom of Pegù and Martaban. But Rossetti on his arrival found Fr. Calchi on his deathbed. Fr. Gallizia arrived the following May, and well received by the king, right away started his apostolate.

He asked for help from the Propagation of the Faith, but receiving no answers, he decided to go personally to Rome to plead his cause. He arrived on July 22, 1737. Fr. Gallo says: “Clement XII... received with great love that excellent religious, back from the Far East to implore from the common Father of the faithful needed help for his new Church.” But he could not get what he was looking for.

Fr. Gallizia's proposals became a reality “in 1740 when Benedict XIV, giving again a proof of his benevolence toward the Barnabites, decreed that the mission of the kingdoms of Ava and Pegù should be entrusted only and solely to them. Once the missionaries were selected - Frs. Paul Nerini, Alexander Mondelli, Gianantonio del Conte - the Holy Father nominated Fr. Gallizia Bishop of Elima and Apostolic Vicar of Burma, and he himself consecrated him on January 29, 1741. The missionaries reached the kingdoms of Ava and Pegù after a long trip full of adventures, losing almost everything including the sacred vessels. Fr. Nerini stopped to take care of the church in Syriam (Thanlyin today), Frs. Mondelli and del Conte followed Bishop Gallizia who, on October 17, 1743, went to visit the king. He received a very warm welcome, the King very happy with the great speech given by the Bishop.”

A problem arose with the invasion of the kingdom by the Burmese army. Finally there was the division of the two kingdoms barring any kind of communication between the two. Therefore our missionaries remained divided, Frs. Mondelli, del Conte, and Bishop Gallizia in Ava, and Fr. Nerini in Pegù.

Shortly after, Bishop Gallizia, and Frs. Mondelli and del Conte were unjustly accused of treason and killed together with other Europeans. The few who escaped the massacre brought the news to Fr. Nerini, who had only Brother Angelo as companion. They too had to escape forcing them for four years to move from one town to another. Finally on April 21, 1749 they were welcomed back in Syriam with great exultation of the population. They were able to build a small city with a school, a conservatory, kindergartens, the hospital, and a beautiful stone church.

Fr. Nerini was invoking for help: “All alone in such a vast kingdom what can I do? How can I attend to the needs of so many and so different provinces of a mission larger than

the whole Italy?" But in the December of 1751 the Procurator General, Fr. Paul Premoli, "was questioned about the situation of the Barnabite missionaries, and he answered that the Apostolic Vicar, Bishop Gallizia, was believed to be dead; the others were at work, and if the pope wanted to send new Barnabite missionaries, the Congregation was ready."

On January 24, 1752 the secretary of the Propagation of the Faith went to see Father General Alexander Viarizzi de Roas to ask for four missionaries for Pegù, and to announce the election of Fr. Nerini as a Bishop and Apostolic Vicar. As soon as Fr. Nerini heard the wonderful news that his confreres were on the way, he felt so happy, but that happiness was clouded by a disaster: the four missionaries perished in a shipwreck, losing also all the documents, including the one naming Fr. Nerini as a Bishop.

The situation got worse when, due to another war, he found himself besieged in Siriam. The city collapsed, and in the ransack the Fathers' residence and the church were heavily damaged, but worst yet Fr. Nerini was condemned to decapitation. The soldiers, who were very fond of him, saved him bringing to the king the head of a Portuguese. But the trick did not work. The order came to arrest him. The soldiers demanded from him to release first of all the women who had found refuge in the church. Fr. Nerini refused with great courage, and one of the soldiers knocked him down with his lance, he was decapitated and his head was brought to the king. It was August 1756.

Two other missionaries, then, were sent: Fr. Alexander Gallizia, nephew of Bishop Gallizia, and Fr. Sebastian Donati, who will die in his efforts to rebuild the mission. So other two missionaries were sent: Fr. Alexander Avenati, and Fr. John Percoto. They reached Rangoon in 1761. For two years they worked tirelessly to rebuild the mission, but on April 5, 1763, Fr. Gallizia, sick with dropsy, died.

Four other missionaries were sent and reached Rangoon in 1767: Frs. Gherardo Cortenovis, Melchior Carpani, Anthony Re, and Ambrose Miconi. Fr. Percoto was named Bishop and consecrated on January 31, 1768.

In 1776 Fr. Carpani, back from Pegù, gave a report on the needs of the mission and presented some notes on the Burmese alphabet, which guided the Congregation in preparing the printing characters, allowing him to print his book of the Burmese alphabet.

In 1776 Bishop Percoto died, and Fr. Cortenovis was the new Bishop, but this time, with a coadjutor in Fr. Gaetano Mantegazza, but Bishop Cortenovis died before he could consecrate his coadjutor.

On July 27, 1781, Joseph II of Austria promulgated the law separating the province of Lombardy from Rome. Since most of the missionaries were from the Lombard Province, this separation made it very difficult to supply new missionaries. All the other provinces were under the shock of the anticlerical laws in Italy. Meantime the need of new missionaries was imperative, therefore, the Cardinal Prefect of the Congregation of the Propagation of the Faith gave an ultimatum to Father General Peruzzini: either you can send missionaries, or give up the mission.

On November 20, 1782, Fr. Peruzzini sent a circular letter to the provincial Superiors asking their opinion. The situation was not too encouraging. In 1782 two missionaries did leave Italy, Frs. Joseph D'Amato and Vincent Sangermano. At their arrival, Fr. Mantegazza decided to go to Rome in person to beg for help. While there, he was consecrated a Bishop in Vercelli, on December 12, 1786. He went back to the mission accompanied by Frs. Alexander Azimonti and Claudio Buttironi. Mantegazza died on August 4, 1794 after ordaining four local priests. In 1802 also Fr. Marcel Cortenovis died, before receiving the nomination as Bishop and Apostolic Vicar. So in 1823 three Barnabites were left: D'Amato, de Brito, and Coe. In 1830 Fr. General Joseph Peda finally officially gave up the mission.

Conclusion and accomplishments

As we have seen the first years of the mission were very hard, especially because of the opposition by the French and Portuguese missionaries of neighboring Siam (Thailand), who accused Fr. Calchi of being a Chinese spy. Fr. Calchi appeared immediately in front of the Court of Ava to defend himself. God's Providence turned such trial into a blessing. The king gave Fr. Calchi freedom to preach and to build churches, but more importantly, he put the whole mission under his special protection, gave a large donation for the building of the first church, and asked that proper diplomatic ties be established with the Pope from whom he wanted "other missionaries and men who could paint, make tapestries, work gold and silver and glass; and more astronomers, geographers, and mechanics, to educate his subjects in the way of Heaven, and initiate them into all forms of human knowledge." Not a surprising request since Fr. Calchi first of all had dedicated himself to the study of the Burmese language to the point of composing and publishing for the first time a dictionary. His attitude became a trademark of the Barnabite mission: they brought the Gospel, but at the same time they made a scientific study of the peninsula, its history and culture, and created cultural ties between Italy and Burma, which were above the contingent political-economic interests.

Many were the missionaries who embarked from Italy toward Burma. The trip itself was very hazardous, requiring great courage. No trip was safe as it is proved by the many missionaries and merchandises which ended up at the bottom of the sea! They had to sail around Cape Town, the southern tip of Africa, but often they would end up on the shores of Brazil, having then to backtrack to the Cape of Good Hope heading for Madras in India. There they waited for a passage to Burma to face a final treacherous obstacle: the Gulf of Martaban, tomb of many ships. Usually the trip would take a year or more with the constant dangers of pirates and storms at sea. The ship used by Fr. Giandona was destroyed in 1777 on the coast of Madagascar. Of the 114 people on board only 26 survived. Fr. Giandona recollects: "We poor survivors were attacked by the natives, left literally naked far away from their village. For six days, naked, hungry, and deprived of everything we wandered through the desert. During the day the scourging sun burned our bodies covering them with sores; and during the night the bitter cold forced us to bury ourselves under the sand up to our neck. The merciful God finally moved the prince of the Bay of St. Augustine to some humanitarian feelings. He allowed us into the village, clothed and placed us on a Dutch vessel which had entered the bay looking for drinking water." This news reached Europe, and instead of causing discouragement, it created new enthusiasm among those who had the missionary spirit.

The Barnabites' mission in Burma lasted over one hundred years, always subject to the political instability of the two kingdoms. Schools, churches, hospitals, seminary for the local clergy, social programs all flourished in the country. Since these missionaries were also scholars with long experience in Europe, they made a tremendous contribution to the development of culture and science in that country. A Grammar and a

Latin-Portuguese-Burmese Dictionary followed Fr. Calchi's dictionary by Fr. Percoto. Since the language did not have an alphabetic order, Fr. Percoto provided one that was taken to Rome by Fr. Carpani to be published by the printing office of the Sacred Congregation of the Propagation of Faith. Eight years later Fr. Mantegazza published an updated and revised edition. Meantime, based on Fr. Percoto's studies, the Propagation of Faith had prepared 60,000 characters in Burmese and 40,000 in Latin which, together with two presses, were taken to Burma by the missionaries. It became the first Burmese printing press.

Another Barnabite, Bishop Gaetano Mantegazza, in 1784 published a "Report on the Kingdoms of Ava and Pegù," a study on the history, geography, and ethnography of the country. A similar publication followed in 1800 titled "Report on the Burmese Kingdom" by Fr. Sangermano. Fr. D'Amato instead studied the flora, the fauna, and the minerals, and published in four in-folio volumes the description of 300 flowers and 200 minerals from Burma, totally unknown in Europe. In the "Short Description" published in 1832 by the "Journal of the Asiatic Society of Bengal," he gave an illustration of precious stones from the mines of Kiatpien in Ava. Fr. De Brito published "Burmese pharmacology with Italian and Latin nomenclature," and a "Burmese grammar for Italians," and an "Italian-Burmese-Pali Dictionary." Pali was the sacred language of the Buddhists. The study of Pali created a very friendly relationship between the missionaries and the Buddhists. In 1763 one of the Buddhist monks composed for his friend Fr. Percoto a "Compendium of the Burmese religion," and Fr. Percoto answered with a "Treatise on the Christian religion in the form of a dialogue between a Christian and a Talapoin." For popular use Fr. Mantegazza published "Dialogue between a salvage Khien and a Siamese Ex-Talapoin," while Fr. Sangermano translated the "Dhamnathat," a compendium of Burmese laws, and the "Maharavazan," a Buddhist cosmography and history of the kings, published after his death in 1833. This great cultural contribution by our missionaries is well recognized and appreciated by today's scholars.

(For further information see Appendix 7)